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Images of woman and her search for happiness in Cynthia Jele's *Happiness is a four-letter word*

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Over the years, African 'feminist' scholars have expressed reservations about embracing feminism as an analytical framework for theorizing issues that affect African women. This is particularly because in many African societies, feminism has been perceived as a negative influence that seeks to tear the cultural fabric and value systems of African communities. Some scholars such as Clenora Hudson-Weems, Chikenje Ogunyemi, Tiamoyo Karenga and Chimbuko Tembo contend that feminism as developed by Western scholars is incapable of addressing context-specific concerns of African women. As a result, they developed womanism as an alternative framework for analysing the realities of women in African cultures. Womanism is premised on the view that African women need an Afrocentric theory that can adequately deal with their specific struggles. Drawing from ideas that have been developed by womanist scholars, this article critically interrogates the portrayal of women in Cynthia Jele's *Happiness is a four-letter word* (2010), with particular focus on the choices that they make in love relationships, marriage and motherhood. My argument is that Jele's text affirms the womanist view that African women exist within a specific cultural context that shapes their needs, aspirations and choices in a different way. **Keywords:** African culture, sisterhood, male companionship, womanism.

Introduction

Happiness is a four-letter word (2010) delineates the challenges that professional African women experience in their personal lives and the choices that they make in order to attain what they perceive as "happiness". Although economic freedom and education enable them to satisfy their material needs and gain leverage over their male partners, the four sisters, Nandi, Princess, Tumi and Zaza believe that they can only be fulfilled through marriage, childbearing and male companionship. What is particularly unsettling about the protagonists' choices, especially from a radical feminist point of view, is that they endure difficult relationships—sometimes with men that appear to be useless—in spite of their economic freedom. Nandi wants to marry Thomas although she is aware of his suspicious ties with his former girlfriend, Pinky. Tumi opts to forgive her husband, Tshepo, after he has betrayed her trust by impregnating another woman. Similarly, Zaza forgoes her sexually satisfying relationship with Bongani for the sake of her marriage and children. The same can be said of Princess who opts to rehabilitate her drug-addicted and thieving boyfriend

instead of getting him arrested. In order to critically interrogate the representation of women in *Happiness is a four-letter word* (to be abbreviated *Happiness* henceforth) and the choices that they make, I draw from ideas developed by a range of womanist scholars such as Clenora Hudson-Weems (“Africana womanism”), Tiamoyo Karenga and Chimbuko Tembo (“Kaiwada womanism”) among others. These theories are particularly relevant to this analysis because they capture the specific cultural context that informs and shapes the decisions and choices of African professional women as portrayed in *Happiness*.

Background: Cynthia Jele and *Happiness is a four-letter word*

Cynthia Nosizwe Jele is a South African writer of the post-apartheid era who was born in the Northern Province of Mpumalanga. She studied Environmental Health at the Natal Technikon and later obtained a BA in International Business from North Central College in Illinois, USA (Jones 2). Although *Happiness* is her first novel, Jele has written two short stories that won the 1st and 4th prize in the 2008 BTA/Anglo-Platinum Short Story Competition. These stories brought her name into the limelight of South African literature. Looking at her academic and professional background (she worked as an *au pair* in the United States of America and a Public Health Officer in Mpumalanga’s Health Department), it is clear that Jele did not receive any professional training in creative writing. However, she claims that she was inspired to take creative writing seriously when she attended a creative writing workshop in the United States (Jani 3). Probably, Jele draws from her own personal experiences as a professional-cum-business woman to tell the stories of career women in her debut novel. *Happiness* was not only successful as a book but also reworked into an equally successful film. In 2011, the book won the Commonwealth Award for first book: Africa region, and the M-Net Literary Award in the Film category. The novel was also shortlisted for the 2011 Booksellers Choice Award. When it was adapted into film in 2016, it competed with famous Hollywood movies such as *Fifty Shades of Black*, *Hail Caesar* and *The Danish Girl*. *Drum Digital* (2016) reports that the film grossed over R10 million on the South African box office circuit.

When it was first published, *Happiness* received favourable reviews particularly for its attempt to represent the “new South African woman” (Gqola 120). While other texts by South African women writers such as Angela Makholwa and Sindiwe Magona have focused on gender violence and exploitation of women in the domestic sphere, Jele recognises that some women in South Africa have transitioned from the drudgery of domestic exploitation to the public sphere which for a long time, has been a preserve of men. Jele’s characters do not necessarily depend on men for financial sustenance. As a result, their love relationships (except for Zaza’s relationship with Bheki) are not guided by financial considerations. James Murua (2) claims to have learnt a few things about South African women from Jele’s novel. Firstly, he

learnt that “South African women are way too forgiving” and secondly that they are “way too kind”. While this reading seems to paint all South Africa women with one stereotypical brush, the point is that Jele’s characters behave in a way which is not expected of educated and financially independent women. Oftentimes, financially independent women are perceived as strong-willed and intolerant of difficult and exploitative relationships. The reason Jele’s women appear to be “way too forgiving” and “way too kind” is probably because of the unique cultural context that shapes their aspirations in a different way. Jele’s protagonists are intolerant of patriarchal oppression, however, they also value culturally sanctioned institutions such as family, heterosexual relationships and marriage. What is important here is that these women chose certain relationships because they believe that their personal happiness is bound up in those relationships. Thus, from this perspective, *Happiness* seems to advance the womanist view that men and women in African societies are complementary sexes and not antagonists. While some feminists may consider this as a cowardly approach that gives patriarchy a lifeline, womanists view this as a much more effective strategy especially in societies where patriarchy is still deeply entrenched. This approach resonates with Obioma Nnaemeka’s (1999) nego-feminism or “no-ego feminism” which emphasises “issues of peace, conflict management and resolution, negotiation, complementarity, give-and-take, and collaboration” (Alkali *et al.* 247). Jele seems to embrace the nego-feminist view that “it is only weak people that seek revenge; strong people forgive, while intelligent people ignore” (in Alkali *et al.* 247). Womanists do not fight patriarchy to become new oppressors but to bring about an equitable society where both sexes treat each other with mutual respect. Ego-feminism envisages a future where male chauvinism is not replaced by feminist ego but by a “coming together of men and women for harmonious survival where there is no victor nor vanquished” (Alkali *et al.* 250).

African professional women and the quest for ‘happiness’

One of the major tenets of Clenora Hudson-Weems’ *Africana* womanism is that it is grounded in African culture. Although some scholars have argued that the notion of “African culture” is essentialist, I argue that Clenora Hudson-Weems uses it, not to suggest that there is one African culture, but to recognize specific cultural contexts of African women as opposed to white European women. Nah Dove (516) embraces *Africana* womanism as an Afrocentric theory and sees “the concept of culture as a tool of analysis for understanding the nature of African women’s experiences”, “a weapon of resistance and a basis for defining a new world order”. The question of culture is particularly important in *Happiness* because it is culture that influences the decisions of the protagonists regardless of their educational and economic status.

Nandi, Tumi, Princess and Zaza belong to two of South Africa’s major cultural groups, namely the Zulu and the Sotho. Arguably, these cultures still perceive mar-

riage, family and child-bearing as well as male companionship as important, particularly in the life of a woman. Like womanists, Jele's protagonists seem to believe that cultural practices need to be reformed, rather than discarded, so that they can meet the specific needs of women. This is evident through Nandi's wedding dress which has to be adjusted so that it could fit her. In other words, the marriage institution (wedding dress) should not be discarded, rather it should be adjusted/reformed to suit Nandi's big body (needs). Womanist scholars such as Hudson-Weems, Karenga and Tembo argue that African women have never been perceived as the "second sex" in African culture. Karenga and Tembo (36) argue that ancient African religious and cultural practices as seen in Kemet (Ancient Egypt) never constructed women as appendages, but rather as equals, of men. It must be noted, however, that this argument is not meant to defend some oppressive African cultural practices but to recognize the specific cultural context of African women which is significantly different from that of Western women. I appropriate these views in order to interrogate the choices and aspirations of the four women in Jele's text.

Clenora Hudson-Weems (206) argues that Africana womanism is a "theoretical concept designed for all women of African descent" whose "primary goal [...] is to create [Africana women's] own criteria for assessing their realities, both in thought and in action". Nikol G. Floyd-Alexander and Evelyn M. Simien (68) have criticized Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism for claiming to speak for all women of African descent. However, in my view, Hudson-Weems' theory is not designed to essentialise African women but to recognize and appreciate their cultural context. Africana womanism departs from feminism in that it focuses on issues that affect black people such as racism, classism and sexism. Although Hudson-Weems enumerates eighteen characteristics of womanists in her book *African Womanism: Reclaiming ourselves* (1993), I will focus on a few that are relevant to this article. Alexander-Floyd and Simien (70) put Clenora-Hudson Weems' eighteen tenets of womanism into three categories, namely agency, alliances and attributes. Agency has to do with self-determination. African women need to self-name, self-define and self-identify rather than wait for others to do so on their behalf. It is through self-definition that Africana women "assert their own vision of their reality in opposition to that of the dominant culture". The second theme, alliances, speaks to commitment to family and community. It includes tenets such as "family-centeredness, wholeness, authenticity, flexible role-playing, adaptability, political alignment with black men, and 'genuine sisterhood' with black women" (Alexander-Floyd and Simien 70). Alliances are attained through political alignment with black men and "genuine sisterhood" with black women. The third and final theme—attributes—speaks to the qualities of Africana womanists, which include strength, male compatibility, respect, recognition, and respect for elders, ambition, mothering, nurturing, and spirituality.

Africana womanism significantly departs from mainstream feminism because of its focus on emancipating both men and women. It also departs from Alice Walker's womanism because it does not advocate lesbianism as a way for women to satisfy sexual needs. Hudson-Weems (209) posits that Africana womanists share an important bond of "genuine sisterhood" as opposed to what is perceived as false sisterhood between black and white women in western feminist movements. Karenga and Tembo (43) define sisterhood as a relationship between women and girls united in mutual support and appreciation, and in common views, values, interests, work and struggle. The notion of "genuine sisterhood" is demonstrated in Jele's *Happiness* through the four sisters who support each other emotionally. Their sisterhood can be construed as genuine because they all belong to the same social class and experience similar life challenges. More importantly, Africana womanism advocates "positive male companionship" which is seen as vital to family and the mutual survival of black men and women.

Cynthia Jele's novel explores the lives of four middle class professional women that live and work in Johannesburg. Nandi Hadebe is an accountant by profession and a junior partner at Le Roux, Mathaba and Associates accounting firm. She is in a relationship with Thomas Phiri and, at the beginning of the novel, they are busy preparing for their upcoming wedding. Tumi is a teacher, married to Tshepo Modise, a businessman and co-founder of an information technology company named SA TeleCom Inc. Zaza Zulu is a former bank teller, now married to Bheki, a prosperous businessman who is "bursting his balls" to provide for his family. Although Zaza is characterized as a "trophy wife" because of her decision to marry a rich man for material reasons, she also runs a fashion boutique and an orphanage named eT-hembeni. Bheki is always busy with his business ventures and has no time to satisfy Zaza's sexual needs. As a result, she engages in an extra-marital affair with Bongani Gumede, a businessman who generously finances her orphanage. Princess is a lawyer by profession and an independent young woman who prides herself as an "equal opportunity lover" because of her liberal social/sexual life. She has had several relationships with different men but now she is in love with Leo, a Zimbabwean painter who has literally turned her love life upside down. She fell in love with Leo at first sight and eventually asked him to move in with her—against her own rules.

Jele's story revolves around the marital-love relationships and experiences of the four protagonists. The novel opens with Nandi and Thomas' wedding preparations which are momentarily disrupted by Thomas' "disappearance". Thomas has a son named Lunga with his ex-girlfriend, Pinky, a situation which complicates his new relationship with Nandi. Nandi believes that Pinky is taking advantage of Lunga to lure Thomas back. Thomas, on the other hand, is torn between his fatherly duties to his son and his equally important responsibilities to Nandi, his fiancée. While Nandi is portrayed as a woman who views success in terms of marriage and "perfect" male

companionship, Pinky is depicted as a conniving, selfish woman who has become a stumbling block to Nandi's happiness. Owing to their rivalry over Thomas, Nandi and Pinky have become arch enemies. Pinky's behaviour—for example—attending funerals and other functions in Thomas' family, suggests that she is attempting to lure Thomas back into her life. Both Nandi and Pinky conceive personal happiness in terms of male companionship in a marriage set-up. While Nandi wants Thomas' full attention in view of the imminent wedding, Pinky takes every opportunity to steal his attention by claiming that Lunga is ill. While the tension between Thomas, Nandi and Pinky affirms the womanist view that men and women need each other, it also shows that harmony of the sexes is not possible when individuals are consumed by selfish needs. Nandi's dream of an ideal relationship with Thomas is impossible because of Lunga who permanently ties Thomas to his previous relationship. As a father, Thomas confesses that he becomes "edgy" each time there is a matter that involves Lunga. As a result, he is rarely home and sometimes Nandi has to crawl into bed and sleep alone. In Nandi's eyes, Pinky is thus a "pest" and "a lunatic girlfriend" (17) who disrupts her potential happiness. Although Africana womanism stresses genuine sisterhood among African women, it appears that sisterhood only applies to women who belong to the same social class, and are willing to forego their personal interests for the happiness of another.

The experiences of the four women suggest that a stable relationship is the dream of every woman while marriage (to a compatible partner) is the ultimate fulfilment. This is not to say that women are appendages of men *per se*, but to say that women need men as much as men need women. Nandi is brought up in a Zulu culture that values marriage and expects women to be married at a particular age. This explains why she demands Thomas' attention and celebrates her upcoming wedding as a major milestone in her life. Her friends and relatives believe that she has made it. The wedding is a reward for her perseverance, which obviously is seen as an important virtue for a woman. All "important women" in her life are there "to witness her success" (9). Part of Nandi's achievement is that she has found a man who is willing to give her a new identity. She cannot wait to be identified as "Mrs Thomas Phiri" (9). While Nandi's behaviour could be read as evidence of internalized patriarchal values, the fact that she is educated and financially stable complicates matters. Kaiwada womanists such as Karenga and Tembo (42) argue that a fundamental concept in Kawaida is that humans are persons-in-community not isolated individuals. Therefore, Kaiwada womanism conceives Black women as women-in-family and women-in-community. Nandi celebrates marriage because in her culture and social community, a married woman commands respect.

Although Jele highlights the difficulties that women encounter in an attempt to satisfy cultural expectations, she does not advocate dismantling the marriage institution. Nandi's battle with a wrong-sized wedding dress which requires a group of

women to help her fit into it suggests that the marriage institution, as it exists, needs to be adjusted in order to cater for the needs of women. Marriage is designed for women and not women for marriage. Therefore, the current scenario where Nandi has to monitor her diet (that is deny herself bodily needs) in order to fit into her wedding dress needs to change. Dieting speaks to a process of suppressing individual subjectivity in order to conform to patriarchal standards, which implies that marriage, in its current design, is like a tight dress that is repressive and suffocating to women. Nandi has to literally “suck her tummy into her wedding dress” (10) while her friends “yank and squeeze and tuck and nip with no success” (11). Nandi and friends do not think of discarding or replacing the dress with a new one. Rather they suggest that a seamstress should be sought to adjust it to Nandi’s size. This resonates with Chikwenje Ogunyemi’s (69) view that “the ultimate difference between the feminist and the womanist is what each sees of patriarchy and what each thinks can be changed”. In view of this, *Happiness* can be read as a womanist text which does not only focus on liberating women as individuals but also reforming patriarchal institutions to cater for the needs of women.

In defining what they call “Kaiwada womanism”, Tiamoyo Karenga and Chimbuko Tembo (42) argue that “African womanhood is open-textured, for we realize that as our experience and knowledge expand, we can and must change it without discarding its essential elements”. The “essential elements” alluded to here are perhaps the underlying principles that guide African women’s decisions and choices. Tumi does not divorce Tshepo for his unfaithful behaviour; instead she demands an apology and orders him to do the right thing by paying “damage” to his girlfriend’s family. Similarly, Princess opts to rehabilitate Leo, her drug addicted boyfriend, instead of sending him to prison. Quoting Alison Perry, Ogunyemi, further argues that a womanist is “a woman who is committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female” (72). This is evident in the way Nandi treats her ex-boyfriend, Chris Phakathi, when he returns from London. Chris dumped Nandi on the verge of their wedding and left her with huge bills to pay. However, upon his return, all Nandi wants is an apology that comes from the bottom of his heart. The focus is on forgiveness and reconciliation rather than militant confrontation of the sexes. In deciding to reach a compromise with their male counterparts, the four sisters affirm the womanist view that men and women complement each other. Patricia Hill Collins argues that womanism, as a philosophy, “supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men” (1). Similarly, Karenga and Tembo (35), define woman as “a bright presence”, “a soulful being” with “a mission on earth”—her mission is to bring harmony and reconciliation in society. As a result, the needs and aspirations of women are aligned to those of the community. “As women we are persons in community, not isolated individuals and our freedom and dignity are inseparable from that of our community and our families”

(Karenga and Tembo 42). Daphne Ntiri (166) also intimates that within the Africana womanist circle, men are not excluded from women's issues. On the contrary, they are invited as partners in problem solving and social change. Womanism's stance on relations between men and women probably explains the protagonists' prioritization of family and heterosexual relationships. Zaza, for example, eventually decides to end her extra-marital affair with Bongani because she recognises that her marriage and family are more important than her individual happiness. Like Ogunyemi's African womanist, Zaza "recognizes that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate [cultural and economic] considerations into her philosophy" (64). While Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism prioritises racial issues which are relevant to the American context, African womanism puts economic and cultural considerations ahead of sexual issues.

Although the four sisters are financially independent they believe that their individual happiness is intertwined with the happiness of their male counterparts. Nandi becomes restless when Thomas briefly disappears on her during the wedding preparations. When he eventually reappears, she literally throws herself into his arms. The reason for her excitement is that Thomas' reappearance has saved her from public shame (15). What we see through Nandi is that education and financial independence do not necessarily make men irrelevant in women's lives. Nandi still subscribes to particular cultural values in spite of her level of education. A womanist, as conceptualised by Karenga and Tembo (40) is culturally grounded, which means "to be rooted in the knowledge and practice of the culture of one's people, to extract lessons from it and to use it in emancipatory, transformative and enriching ways". Cultural grounding is important for womanists because "it is culture that gives us identity, purpose and direction" (Karenga and Tembo 41). Nandi's views in relation to marriage are grounded in Zulu culture. This is evident in her rather "superstitious" belief that Thomas' disappearance and his seeing the wedding dress before the wedding are all indicators of a wedding that is doomed to fail. One should note that womanism does not celebrate everything in culture including oppressive practices. Rather, it gives women the freedom to choose "the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world" (Karenga and Tembo 35).

The title of the novel, *Happiness is a four-letter word*, can be interpreted as an allusion to the four sisters who find happiness in sisterhood. In other words, women can overcome challenges and find happiness if they unite and work together as sisters. However, the events in the text also suggest that sisterhood alone, without male companionship, cannot guarantee happiness. Happiness is love—a four-letter word—but this love is two-dimensional. On one hand, women have to love each other as sisters but on the other, they need male companionship. Nandi seeks happiness through marriage to a man she loves. Tumi believes that a child will complete her womanhood. Princess ignores her own rules because she has found Leo, a man after

her own heart. Before Leo, Princess was an individualist with no obligations in life.

However, when she meets Leo, she feels fulfilled. The fact that the four sisters continue to be restless in spite of their comfortable lives implies that happiness is an internal rather than an external force. Zaza leaves her “three-million-rand house in Bryanston” to visit Bongani in his “dilapidated flat in Sunnyside” (18). The fact that Zaza has to “close her eyes” to experience “bliss” (18) with Bongani shows that the bliss that she seeks is inside her. Although she is unfaithful to her husband, Zaza still prioritizes her family and marriage. Each time she sleeps at Bongani’s flat in Sunnyside, she has to rush back home early in the morning to make “toast and rice krispies” (19) for her children.

Through Zaza, Jele portrays woman not only as wife and mother but also as a human being with feelings that need to be satisfied. Oftentimes, when a woman gets married, it is assumed that motherhood takes away desire for sex and replaces it with love for children. Zaza’s experience shows that motherhood is not something natural to every woman but something that a woman performs. In fact, Zaza has mastered the art of performing both motherhood and wifehood. When she goes to the airport to welcome Bheki upon his return from Tanzania, she wears “a sexy strapless dress” which she knows would make him go “berserk” (67). She also performs the giggles and endearments that she makes in response to his comments.

In an interview with Susan Arndt (717), Ogunyemi emphasises the need for men and women to work together to bring about change in African societies. Men and women need each other. Princess needs Leo because there is no other man who makes her happy the way Leo does. Leo also needs Princess because she provides and cares for him. When Leo becomes a drug addict and starts stealing from Princess, the latter supports him and pays for his rehabilitation. The point is that the quest for freedom from patriarchal oppression needs not be translated into fighting against men because, as womanists argue, African men and women share the same destiny. When her friends advise her to report Leo to the police, Princess defends him saying that “Leo is not a common criminal” and that “he does not belong in jail” (209). Although one can blame Princess for allowing herself to be used by Leo, her behaviour resonates with the womanist view that it is possible for “a woman to love a man totally; just for himself and not for the fact that he was the father of her offspring or the provider of her personal comforts” (Osammor in Alkali *et al.* 249). Thus, for all his drug addiction and criminal tendencies, Princess keeps and protects Leo. The same can be said of Bheki and Zaza who eventually realize that their relationship is not working and that they need to do things differently. Bheki acknowledges that he has been neglecting Zaza by prioritizing business while Zaza also acknowledges (to herself) that she has been doing wrong by cheating on her husband. It is at this point (when both sexes acknowledge the wrong things they do) that they can begin to work together to bring change.

On the other hand, Tumi, in spite of her material success which is evident in her relocation from the disorderliness of the township to the peace and quiet of the suburbs (29), seeks fulfilment, not in herself, but in another human being—a child. Her world is shattered when she realizes that Tshepo has already fathered a child with Nomkhosi. Tumi believes that her inability to give Tshepo a child makes her less of a woman than Nomkhosi. She blames herself for being a failed woman as much as she blames Nomkhosi for being loose and Tshepo for “spreading his seed to every willing cow” (113). What is evident throughout *Happiness* is that women sympathize with each other on matters that do not involve rivalry over a man. Nandi cannot sympathize with Pinky’s position as a single mother; rather she blames her for being an opportunist who wants to take advantage of Lunga to weave her way back into Thomas’ life. Although Pinky has a son with Thomas, Nandi does not see the reason why Pinky should continue attending funerals in Thomas’s family.

Jele’s *Happiness* has demonstrated that women in different cultural contexts have different needs. It has also shown that educated and financially independent women may choose to deal with difficult relationships instead of living as single women. In discounting the family-centredness of womanism, Tendai Mangena (11) argues that “insisting on a family centered approach means that women writers have to be blind and silent about issues such as rape and incest, and such blindness entails colluding with patriarchy on women oppression”. Although Mangena has a point in highlighting the dangers of idolising family, womanism does not necessarily promote blindness and silence in the face of such issues. Rather, it proposes an approach that includes both men and women in finding solutions to these problems rather than one that focuses on the victim while ostracising the victimiser. Since womanism does not see men and women as fighting different battles, financial independence for women, as we see in *Happiness*, is used to mend rather than destroy relations between men and women. Although the four women provide support to each other, they also realize that they cannot do without men. Thus instead of seeking to satisfy each other sexually as Celie and Shug Avery do in Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, they seek sexual satisfaction from their male counterparts. Jele thus appears to advocate sisterhood for moral and emotional support rather than for sexual satisfaction. Each time a friend is in a difficult situation, the other sisters visit and help her to recover. When Tumi discovers that Tshepo has impregnated Nomkhosi, Nandi takes her into her house and provides her with emotional support until she is ready to go back to her house. Similarly, Zaza takes Princess in when she is abandoned by Leo soon after discovering that she is pregnant with his child.

The bottom line is that womanism sees divorce or single motherhood as a last resort. The first priority is to fight for the relationship/marriage to work. When Tshepo cheats on his wife, Tumi does not take the radical route of throwing him out for good. Her friends and family also advise her not to push him away. Simi-

larly, Nandi decides to fight against Pinky in order to keep Thomas. As far as the four friends are concerned, a man is worth fighting for. Nandi vows to “play dirty too” (48) when she realizes that Pinky is using Lunga in order to lure Thomas back. Princess goes to the extent of using her money to keep Leo in spite of his addiction problem. Similarly, Bongani’s wife, Lebo, threatens Zaza to bring her husband back home because “the children are confused about the absence of their father” (224). Although some women such as Miriam Mabena and Lebo remain in abusive marriages for financial reasons, others, such as Tumi and Princess, make conscious decisions to forgive their unfaithful men and move on. Lebo confesses that at her age it will not be easy to find another man, “which man would want a tired thirty-something-year-old divorcee with two children when they can have a baggageless and gorgeous twenty-two year-old? It’s tough out there” (225). Lebo’s statement underscores the view that married women ought to unite, not against cheating men, but against women who cheat with their men. Similarly, Tumi eventually reconciles with Tshepo after a short period of separation claiming thus: “I have realized that my husband is a big part of who I am and I am not ready to lose him” (282). To a certain extent, women, as represented in *Happiness*, understand that men, like women, are imperfect beings who deserve to be given a second chance. The experiences of the protagonist bear testimony to the fact men and women need each other. Therefore, instead of fighting each other, they need to work together towards a common destiny.

Marriage as depicted in *Happiness* is a necessary institution that probably needs reform rather than dissolution. Probably, this explains why it is difficult for married women in *Happiness* to seek divorce. They have to think about the children and what their lives would be like outside marriage. Zaza’s maid, Thembi, is an example. She is stuck with a hopeless husband because the children love their father. To make matters worse, her husband, who is useless to her (66) is planning to marry a second wife. Zaza’s reason for remaining in her marriage is that it is her ticket out of poverty. She married Bheki to escape her frustrating job as a bank teller and get money for her sister’s studies. These are issues that usually apply to African women. Womanism is thus “informed by African survival technologies evolved over many centuries by Africans themselves” (Muhwati *et al.* 1). Similarly, Monica Coleman (9) speaks about the need to focus on the ethics of survival among African women which sometimes informs the decisions and choices they make. In marrying Bheki, Zaza chooses money over love. She finds love in her illicit affair with Bongani while fulfilling her marital obligations to Bheki. It is worth-noting that Zaza knows how to separate her needs from her wants. Although she enjoys Bongani’s company, she knows that her relationship with him is merely flirtatious—her life is with Bheki, her provider.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the choices and decisions that women make in relation to marriage, family and motherhood are largely determined by the cultural context in which they live. While it is generally assumed that economically independent women do not necessarily need to conform to certain cultural/patriarchal practices that are often perceived as oppressive, the four protagonists in *Happiness* opt to keep their men and protect their marriages in spite of the challenges they face. Instead of fighting against their male counterparts or opting out of marriage, the four sisters seek and/or attain personal fulfilment and happiness through male companionship, marriage and motherhood. My conclusion is that Jele's text can be read as affirming the womanist view that African men and women complement each other and the freedom and happiness of one is dependent on the freedom and happiness of the other. Freedom for African professional women does not necessarily entail discarding institutions such as marriage and practices such as child-bearing.

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